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County Executive Scott Walker  
2006 Budget Address  
September 29, 2005

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Mr. Chairman, Clerk Ryan, Members of the County Board, fellow citizens of Milwaukee County, it is a pleasure to join with you once again to share my vision for county government.

My vision for our county is of an economically vibrant community that reverses decades of population and employment loss. A community that knows our government contributes to a higher quality of life in the region because it provides the crucial services and amenities that keep and attract both residents and businesses. A community that knows our government will provide for those in need because we are committed to a strong "safety-net". A community that knows that equality and opportunity, as well as the safety of our residents, are high priorities for our government. A community where the tough choices we make to create a lean and efficient government will make our residents proud of our government once again.

To turn my vision into reality, I have prepared a budget that places these priorities at the forefront of our county's operations. The foundation of my budget is freezing the property tax levy.

Why is it so important to me to hold the line on taxes? Because I believe that it is the cornerstone of economic growth in Milwaukee County. It's the kick-start to the growth essential to keep and bring back residents and employers.

I am not alone. In a 2004 report, Harvard professor Edward Glaeser explained how reining in higher taxes, attracting a skilled workforce, and investing in education and safer streets are the critical components to economic growth. His report, *The Skilled City*, emphasizes that skyrocketing taxes will impede the growth of communities, particularly in cold-weather regions such as Milwaukee County.

I know that some, some even here in this room, have called my pledge nothing more than a political ploy. But Professor Glaeser underscores the importance of our approach. In fact, I believe his research, as well as that of others, illustrates why it is so

important to hold the line on our taxes. As he says in his report, communities like Milwaukee County cannot be complacent.

Unfortunately, the pension and sick leave packages that Tom Ament pushed five years ago continue to weigh this county down like an anchor. As I sat down with key leaders in my administration to assemble our budget, we faced a daunting \$58.9 million shortfall. Two-thirds of that amount comes from the benefits granted by his administration. This is the legacy of Ament's unconscionable and criminal raid on current and future taxpayers.

But I took on that budget challenge, just as I have taken on the fiscal challenges of the past. And I did it while maintaining my pledge to hold the line on taxes.

**Today I am proud to introduce my fourth straight budget that does not raise the property tax levy from the previous year.**

Because of the Ament fiasco, balancing this year's budget was not easy, to be sure. I had to make some significant and tough decisions. In the end, however, they were decisions necessary to ensure that we continue down the path that returns economic prosperity and growth to this community.

How did we do it? We put our citizens first.

The first step was to unwind the damage of the Ament administration's financial greed. I will not ask our residents and employers to forego important services to pay for these horrific benefit enhancements. We reviewed the financial burdens created by the Ament administration and recommended changes in funding for employee fringe benefits to ensure residents' critical services were not sacrificed to pay for these misdeeds.

We also addressed the abandonment of local government and taxpayers by the current Governor and his administration. This is not just a Milwaukee County problem. Counties, cities, towns and villages all across the state are being asked to fund more of the state's operations, from courts to human services, because of this Governor's disinterest in Wisconsin's local governments.

In fact, we face a de facto attack from this Governor and a state administration bent on solving their fiscal problems by dumping them onto local taxpayers. Their lack of leadership has put pressure on counties already stretched thin.

In contrast, the majority of independently elected officials in the county worked with us in this budget process.

For example, we worked closely with the Sheriff to reverse the trend of deficits in past years. The Sheriff, like my own department heads, worked diligently to craft a budget that places a priority on public safety while being mindful of our financial straits. I applaud Sheriff Clarke for his efforts.

In this budget, we maintain our commitment to safety net services such as GAMP. And we continue to care for our older adults and our veterans in this county as well.

We also provide for quality of life attractions that are an important tool in our economic development efforts. We continue our commitment to key cultural institutions, and maintain stable funding for our parks system at a time when so many other areas of county government have had to make tough decisions to reduce their overall spending.

And finally, yet most importantly, we did this by freezing property taxes and allowing working families, seniors, young professionals and those who create jobs in our county to keep more of their hard-earned money.

Some have suggested that higher taxes are somehow just the cost of citizenship. I would argue that this is the kind of prevailing thinking that dominated the last few decades of leadership in our community. That's the kind of thinking that has left us the task of working to restore our economy, our treasured assets and our morale.

I believe we are at a crossroads. We could choose the easy route. The Governor's budget veto would allow all of you here to increase my budget proposal by over \$8 million. Or we can choose, instead, to continue to work together to make things even better, to operate government even more efficiently, and to put the people of this county ahead of the special interests.

The choice here is clear: we can choose to validate Tom Ament's shameful legacy. A choice that will ultimately leave this county in ruins.

Or we can choose to strive for something bigger, something better, and something greater than we ever imagined.

I choose the latter.

Two years ago, we worked together to ensure that one of our largest employers, Midwest Airlines, could continue to operate at a time when they were extremely vulnerable. Using our financial tools and without taxpayer money, we not only helped a hometown favorite survive, we saved jobs.

I want to thank the Chairman and the members of this Board for your help.

Just last year we took a similar track to convince GE Healthcare to site their expansion in Milwaukee County, resulting in over 2000 good-paying jobs that could have ended up elsewhere.

Soon, I will forward to you a resolution to do it again. With our guarantee, the City of South Milwaukee will provide a TIF to Bucyrus International that will result in the protection of 850 jobs and the creation of over 250 jobs in their city and another 55 in Milwaukee.

When we work together, we can make a positive difference.

My budget is based on a few key priorities; freezing the property tax levy....and I mean *really* freezing it; providing essential safety net services for those most in need; and contributing to the overall quality of life for our county and our region. All of which I believe are critical components of our drive to not only keep businesses and residents here, but to attract new jobs and new residents.

I offer to you today a balanced budget that freezes the property tax levy, a budget that continues our strong commitment to human services and cultural growth. Now I don't expect all 20 of us to agree on every item in this proposal. Yet, I ask you to examine the fundamental components of my vision for our county; one of a county where families and businesses want to move to, one where taxes don't drive seniors and working families out of their homes, one where employers can afford to stay and others want to come here with their jobs, and one where our cultural and humanitarian efforts are appealing to people from all over our region.

If you don't believe this vision is best for Milwaukee County, then I call on you to bring forth your own. But let's not confuse bickering for a real dialogue on this budget. We must set aside political differences to ensure that we get things done in this county. Let's make the people proud of their government.

I stand ready to work with each of you.

We are, as I said, at a crossroads. The people of Milwaukee County are looking to us to provide solid leadership to ensure that all citizens, not just those in one district or another, but that citizens throughout the entire county are given the opportunity to live in a community that is a great place to raise a family, to attend school, to go to work, to open a business and even to retire.

We've come a long way, but we're not done yet. With your help, I know we can get the job done.